

Chapter 4

DYNAMICS OF PROSELYTIZATION

Bangladesh is an outlier to the domain of Islam. Though this region contains one out of every eight Muslims in the world, she is physically separate from the heart-land of the faithful that forms a contiguous landmass stretching across the globe from Mauritania to Pakistan and from Turkey to Somalia. The preponderance of the Muslims in this region poses several unresolved puzzles in the history of Islam and South Asia.

The physical environment and social milieu of Bengal is radically dissimilar from that of a typical Muslim country. The heart-land of Islam is located in an arid and semi-arid zone. Bengal, on the contrary, is a wet delta intersected by innumerable rivers and characterized by a monsoon climate. Islam flourished in the physical and social milieu of caravan cities. Xavier de Planhol described Islam as "a religion of town-dwellers and merchants propagated by the nomads, scornful of the land and those who work it" (1957, p. 126). By contrast, Islam in Bengal was the religion of the agriculturists, woodcutters, fishermen and boatmen who lived in rural areas.

The preponderance of the Muslims in Bengal stands out in striking contrast to its failure in converting the infidels in much of South Asia. As Titus observes, "...so far as the conversion of India as a whole is concerned, Islam signally failed. In no other country save China where her arms and missionaries have gone has she accomplished so little in proportion to the population" (1959, p. 7). It is, therefore, a puzzle in South Asia's history that Hinduism which

defended itself so successfully against Islam in much of South Asia failed to arrest Islam's widespread diffusion in Bengal.

The explanations for this puzzle have been complicated by the virtual silence of historical records on spread of Islam in Bengal. Traditional chronicles in mediaeval Bengal which were composed by the courtiers to extol the achievements of their masters ignored the gradual diffusion of Islam in Bengal. There are only incidental references to spread of Islam in the chronicles, hagiographies and literary sources. Owing to meagreness of historical data, the accounts of the spread of Islam in Bengal are essentially guesses based on fragmentary and anecdotal evidence. Opinions, therefore, vary sharply on most of the issues relating to Muslim preponderance in Bengal. According to a school of historians, the Muslims in Bengal are the descendants of Muslim immigrants from west Asia who were attracted to this region by its economic affluence. The anthropologists, on the other hand, maintain that the Muslims of Bengal are racially akin to Bengali Hindus and are likely to be offspring of local converts. Historians also differ on the motivations for conversion to Islam in Bengal. The debate was occasionally coloured by caste prejudices. The Muslim historians in Bengal viewed the hypothesis of low-caste origin of Muslims in Bengal as a sinister design of the British and Hindu historians to denigrate their forefathers (Rahim 1963, vol. I, p. 57).

In fact, the census of 1872 triggered the debate on the origins of the Muslims in Bengal. Prior to Bengal's first census in 1872, it was usually assumed that the religious composition of population in Bengal was broadly similar to the neighbouring provinces of South Asia where the Hindus constituted a distinct majority. The popular perception was that the Muslims of Bengal like the British rulers in the nineteenth century were a "handful of foreigners" (Ali 1985, vol. IB, p. 750). The census of 1872 revealed that the Presidency of Bengal was the home of more than sixteen million Muslims. Beverley, the Superintendent of the census of 1872 realized that the existence of such a large Muslim population cannot be explained by immigration from outside. There is, however, no direct historical evidence on the expansion of Islam in Bengal. Beverley, therefore, relied on indirect anthropological evidence on the Muslims of Bengal. According to Beverley, there is a striking similarity in the social position, physique, manners and customs between the Muslims and low-caste Hindus. He, therefore, attributed

the expansion of Islam to conversion of numerous low-caste Hindus in Bengal.

Beverley's casual empiricism was later supported by elaborate anthropometric surveys of Herbert Risley (1915). He divided the population of South Asia into seven categories on the basis of three criteria—cephalic index (breadth of head as % of its length), nasal index (breadth of nose as % of its length) and stature. According to Risley, the Muslims of Bengal belong to Mongolo-Dravidian ethnic group which is "probably a blend of Dravidian and Mongoloid elements with a strain of Indo-Aryan blood in the higher group". He divided the population of Bengal into fourteen categories. On the basis of nasal index, he suggested that the Muslims of eastern Bengal had closer resemblance to lower castes (like the Pod, Koch and Chandals) than the higher castes like the Brahmins. Risley, therefore concluded that the Muslims of eastern Bengal were converts from the low caste Hindus.

The Beverley-Risley thesis on local origins of the Bengali Muslims was first challenged by Khondkar Fazle Rubbee (1895), who himself was a scion of the immigrant Muslim aristocracy. His arguments may be divided into two categories: (1) weaknesses of anthropometric surveys, and (2) historical evidence on Muslim immigration to Bengal. Rubbee highlighted three weaknesses of Risley's anthropometric survey. First, he argues that Risley's data are biased. His sample of the Muslims of Bengal was confined to 185 poor Muslims, mostly convicts in jails. Rubbee alleges that Risley instructed his assistant to exclude from his survey upper class Muslims and those who possessed regular features. Secondly, Rubbee maintains that Risley ignored variations among the Muslims of Bengal by lumping them into one category while Risley himself took into account variations among the Hindus by collecting separate measurements for thirteen categories of Hindus. Thirdly, Rubbee argued that the physical characteristics of original Muslim immigrants have undergone considerable changes "owing to their intermingling with other races and the effects of climate, soil, food and modes of life and in consequence of their professions and habits during a long process of time coupled with hard life and poverty which was imposed on them". He maintained that despite these mutations, there exists a material difference between the physical constitution and appearance of Muslims of immigrant descent and those of Hindu descent.

Rubbee argues that there is no direct historical evidence on large-scale conversion of Hindus to Islam while there is indisputable evidence of immigration of Muslims from Afghanistan, Turkistan, Iran, Arabia, and distant parts of India to Bengal during the uninterrupted Muslim rule in India for a period of 562 years. He also referred to two types of indirect evidence on foreign origin of the Muslims in Bengal. First the fact that numerous towns, villages, market places, parganas and districts are named after Muslim settlers indicates that a large number of Muslims came from outside. This hypothesis is supported by the existence of rent-free estates which were granted to Muslim immigrants by the Muslim rulers. Finally, Rubbee maintained that the dialects and pronunciation of Bengali Muslims were different from those of their Hindu counterparts.

While Rubbee was right in highlighting the weaknesses of Risley's anthropometric survey, he did not at all succeed in proving that all Bengali Muslims were immigrants from outside. The silence of the historical records on conversion of the Hindus to Islam does not necessarily imply that such conversions did not at all take place. The historical records of medieval Bengal focus exclusively on the Muslim rulers and their courtiers and ignore altogether the life of common people. It is not at all unlikely that gradual conversion of the Hindus in rural Bengal would go altogether unnoticed in the historical records. The Muslim names of many towns and villages in Bengal merely indicate that immigrant Muslims dominated political life. They do not at all prove that the immigrant Muslims were in a majority. The linguistic differences between the Hindus and the Muslims should not be over-played. Obviously dialects vary from region to region. However, the fact that the same dialect was spoken by both Hindus and Muslims in a region indicates that the dialects were not shaped by the language of the immigrants alone.

The literary sources in medieval Bengal contradict Rubbee's contention that most of the Muslims were offspring of immigrants from west Asia. The very fact that the writers in the 14th and 15th century felt the urge of writing books on Islam in Bengali shows that there was already a sizeable Bengali-speaking Muslim population. (Huq 1983). Had Islam been confined to immigrants alone, there would not have been any demand for an Islamic literature in the vernacular. The composition of the book "Kifayat-ul-Musallin" by the seventeenth century poet Shaikh Muttalib is a case in point. It is related by Shaikh Muttalib that his mentor Moulavi Rahmatullah en-

trusted the task of writing this book to him when the Muslims in a congregation sought Moulavi Rahmatullah's help in producing a religious manual in Bengali so "that they could perform duties according to scriptures" (Roy 1983, p. 76).

Methodological weaknesses of Risley's anthropometric surveys which were first pointed out by Rubbee have also been emphasized in subsequent studies. In spite of these methodological weaknesses, the main findings of Risley's survey on Bengali Muslims could not be discarded because they are supported by all subsequent anthropometric surveys. P.C. Mahalanobis (1927) and B.S. Guha (1944) concluded that the Muslims of Bengal were akin to low caste Hindus. A systematic anthropometric survey was undertaken by D.N. Majumdar and C.R. Rao in the 1950s. In this study, the Muslims of Bengal were divided into fifteen groups. Only one (designated "Muslims of Dacca") of these groups had some of the anthropometric characteristics of high caste groups of Bengal. Nine Muslim groups had, identical mean values as two low-caste groups. Five Muslim groups closely resembled the tribal groups of Bengal. The report concluded that the possible origin of Muslim population in Bengal may be traced to scheduled caste non-Muslim groups of Bengal, and not to high caste groups (1960, p. 17).

The findings of Risley with respect to racial origins of the Muslims of Bengal are also supported by serological surveys. Blood groups as indices of relationship are considered superior to anthropometric measurements because serological differences in the blood cells are determined by heredity and not affected by environment. The serological data collected by D.N. Majumdar suggest that the Muslim population of Bengal are racially different from the Muslims outside India and also from their coreligionists in the Uttar Pradesh. According to Majumder (1960), the blood groups of the Muslims of Bengal are similar to non-caste Hindus and the Mahisayas of Bengal. The anthropometric surveys cited above clearly indicate that the majority of the Muslims of Bengal are likely to be the descendants of local converts.

Though anthropometric evidence suggests that the majority of the Muslims were racially akin to low-caste Hindus, it is not possible to reject the indisputable evidence that a number of Muslim immigrants settled in Bengal. Some Muslims in Bengal originated from an admixture of local and immigrant population. The real issue in

the debate is the proportion of immigrants in the Muslim population in Bengal. In 1901 A.A. Ghuznavi hazarded the following guess, "I think that it will not be unsafe to conclude that roughly speaking 20% of the present Mohammedans are lineal descendants of foreign settlers, that 50% of them have an admixture of foreign blood and the remaining 30% are probably descended from Hindu and other converts" (Quoted in Ali 1985, Vol. IB, p. 788). On the basis of available data on Muslim groups in the census report of 1901, Gait concluded that the foreign elements among the Mohammadans of Bengal "cannot exceed one-sixth of the total number of persons who profess the faith of Islam" (1901, p. 125). Ali is of the opinion that the number of immigrant Muslims in Bengal is "considerably higher than the local converts" (1985, Vol. IB, p. 787). The most ambitious attempt to determine the proportion of immigrants in Muslim population of Bengal was made by Rahim (1963). In his opinion, the Muslim population of Bengal in 1570 stood at 2.7 million of which 1.9 million were local and 0.8 million were immigrants. According to Rahim's estimate, the total Muslim population of Bengal in 1770 was 10.6 million of which 3.27 million belonged to the stock of immigrant Muslims.

Rahim's estimates are based on two simple assumptions. First, on the basis of historical records on Muslim immigrants, Rahim made some guesses about Muslim immigration to Bengal. He estimated that between 1220 and 1756 A.D., 3,37,000 Muslim soldiers came to Bengal. He assumed that no return migration took place. This assumption is unrealistic (Karim 1985, p. 195). During the Muslim rule, Bengal was infamous for its unhealthy climate. Furthermore, the immigrant Muslims had a liking for the cities. It is unlikely that all members of the invading armies settled in rural Bengal. His estimates of Muslim immigrants are, therefore, likely to be biased upwards.

Secondly, on the basis of census data since 1872 which indicated that Muslim population in Bengal increased at a faster rate than Hindu population, he assumed that the Muslim population in Bengal doubled in every one hundred years and the Hindu population increased at the rate of 60 percent in a century.

There are two major shortcomings of Rahim's estimate. First, Rahim suggests that 3,37,000 Muslim soldiers who arrived in Bengal during the period 1220 to 1756 AD swelled to 32,71,500 owing to higher fertility rate among the Muslims. If his logic is correct, the

Muslims should also have constituted a majority in other areas of South Asia such as Delhi and Agra where the bulk of Muslim immigrants settled.

As Table 8 indicates, growth rate for the Muslims of South Asia as a whole was 1.06 percent per annum during the period 1881-1941 whereas the Muslims in Bengal grew at a rate of 1.01 percent. This suggests that immigrant Muslim population in other parts of South Asia grew at a rate faster than that in Bengal. Nevertheless the Muslims remained an insignificant minority around the centres of Muslim political power in North and South India. This clearly indicates that Rahim's assumption about the growth rate of immigrant Muslims in Bengal is highly exaggerated.

Secondly, Rahim assumed that the Muslim population in Bengal grew at the rate of 1 percent and Hindus at the rate of 0.6 percent per annum during the period 1570 to 1870. This assumption is inconsistent with stylized facts of demography. According to the theory of demographic transition, population in pre-industrial societies was stationary because high birth rates in such societies was counterbalanced by high death rates. There were ups and downs in the population, but there was no consistent upward trend. The usual course was a gradual growth for a short-period followed by an abrupt decline. It is, therefore, likely that both Hindu and Muslim populations were stationary in the pre-British Bengal. Rahim's estimate of growth of Muslim population is highly exaggerated. The percentage of immigrants in total Muslim population is likely to be below 10 percent.

The foregoing analysis clearly indicates that most of the Muslims in Bengal are of local origin. It is, however, difficult to explain why local Hindus were attracted to Islam. Nowhere is the resistance to an alien religion so stubborn as in South Asia. Paradoxically, the Hindus of South Asia who accepted so easily political domination of alien Muslim rulers zealously guarded against any intrusion in the religious sphere. Will Durant attributes the primacy of religion in India to the doctrine of transmigration. As Durant observes, "If the Hindus have permitted alien governments to be set over them again and again, it is partly because they did not care much who ruled or exploited them—natives or foreigners, the crucial matter was religion, not politics, the soul and not the body, endless later lives than the passing one" (1963, p. 503). On the face of it, Bengal is virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the subcontinent. There is, therefore, no obvious explanation for Islam's relative success here. Historians

Table 8. A Comparison of population growth by community in Bengal and India, 1891-1941

Community	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	Growth rate between 1881-1941 (Percent per year)
Hindus in India	187.84	207.56	206.86	217.19	216.24	238.64	270.18	0.60
No.(in million)								
% of total population	75.09	74.24	72.87	71.68	70.73	70.67	69.46	-
Hindus in Bengal	17.25	18.06	19.81	20.57	20.41	21.79	25.31	0.63
No.(in million)								
% of total population	48.40	47.20	47.00	45.23	43.72	43.48	41.98	-
Muslims in India	49.95	57.06	62.11	67.83	71.00	79.30	94.44	1.06
No.(in million)								
% of total population	19.97	20.41	21.88	22.39	23.23	23.49	24.28	-
Muslims in Bengal	17.86	19.58	21.57	23.81	25.00	27.28	32.74	1.01
No.(in million)								
% of total population	50.16	51.15	51.19	52.34	53.55	54.44	54.30	-
Other Communities in India	12.34	14.94	14.88	17.97	18.47	19.74	24.36	0.78
No.(in million)								
% of total population	4.94	5.35	5.25	5.93	6.04	5.84	6.26	-
Other Communities in Bengal	0.49	0.62	0.76	1.10	1.27	1.04	2.24	0.73
No.(in million)								
% of total population	1.44	1.55	1.81	2.43	2.73	2.08	3.72	-
Total population in India	250.15	279.57	283.86	303.00	305.72	337.67	388.99	0.73
No.(in million)								
Total population in Bengal	35.60	38.27	42.14	45.49	46.70	50.11	60.30	0.78
No.(in million)								

Sources : 1. Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (New York: Russel and Russell, 1968) p.179.2. R.A. Dutch, *Census of India, 1941*, Vol. IV (Delhi: Manager Publications, 1941), p.48-49.

Note : The data on Bengal refer to the British territory only and exclude Bengal States.

differ as to why the people of Bengal were attracted to Islam more than their compatriots in other regions of India. In the existing literature, four types of hypotheses on Muslim preponderance in Bengal can be identified:

- Intervention of Muslim rulers.
- Reaction of the low caste Hindus against Brahmanical oppression.
- Reaction of the Buddhists against Hindu oppression.
- Missionary activities of the Muslim saints (*Pirs*).

Two arguments may be advanced in favour of the hypothesis that royal patronage was a crucial variable in the spread of Islam in Bengal. First, though there are sporadic instances of conversion to Islam in the pre-Muslim period, there was no significant proselytization to Islam before the establishment of the Muslim rule in Bengal. It is, therefore, inferred that the Muslim rulers in Bengal actively encouraged conversion. This hypothesis is supported by the accounts of the Portuguese merchant Barbosa who noted that the Hindus in the sixteenth century Bengal turned into Muslims "to obtain favour of the King and the governors". (Mukhopadhaya 1980, p. 346). Secondly, some historians argue that "the use of force in some form or other has always been recognized by the Muslim rulers of India and by the orthodox lawyers of Islam, as a proper and lawful method of propagating the faith of the prophet" (Titus 1959, p. 3). It is, therefore, presumed that the Muslim rulers in Bengal also pursued the "fire and sword" policy to convert the infidel subjects in Bengal. For example, Beverley points out, "The Mohammadans were ever ready to make conquests with the Koran as with the sword. Under Sultan Jalaluddin (Jadu) for instance, it is said that the Hindus were persecuted almost to extermination" (1872, p. 132). Obviously, the presence of Muslim rule in Bengal facilitated the spread of Islam. However, it is doubtful whether it played any active role in the process. Islam came to Bengal six hundred years after its advent when the fiery zeal of the faithful for proselytization had already been mellowed by mundane political considerations. This is evident from the interpretations in South Asia of the classical tenets of Islam regarding the obligations of Muslim rulers to convert the infidels. Like Trotskyism, the classical canon law of Islam prescribes that it is incumbent on a Muslim ruler to wage *jihad* (holy war) until the whole world is brought under the sway of Islam. The world is

divided into two camps: *darul Islam* (abode of Islam) and *darul harb* (abode of war). The Muslim rulers are enjoined by the canon law to transform *darul harb* to *darul Islam*. *Jihad* can be postponed only if the infidels submit to Muslim rule, become *dhimmi*s and pay the *Jijya* and *Kharaz*. Such accommodation with the infidels is not, however, permitted in all cases. According to classical authorities, the status of *dhimmi*s can be extended to only those people who have a scripture recognized by Islam (*Ahlul Kitab*). Strictly speaking, this relaxation is not applicable to Hindus whose scriptures are not recognized by the Islamic law. For the idolaters like the Hindus, the choice is either to accept Islam or to die. A controversy arose in the eighth century A.D., when the Muslims invaded Sind, as to whether peaceful coexistence of Hinduism in a Muslim state was legal. It was ultimately decided that the Hindus could be allowed to pursue their own religion and to enjoy all the privileges of subjects if they submit to Muslim rule and pay *jijya* and other taxes (Titus 1959). Thus the classical injunction for proselytization was significantly diluted long before Islam came to Bengal.

The distribution of Muslims in different regions of South Asia clearly contradicts the hypothesis that the Muslim political power was the most crucial variable in the spread of Islam. If this hypothesis was correct, there would have been Muslim preponderance in areas around the seats of Muslim rule. The fact that the Muslims remained an insignificant minority in Delhi region where the Muslims ruled for more than six hundred years clearly suggests that Islam in South Asia was not imposed from above. In Bengal also, the share of the Muslims in total population was higher in areas remote from the seats of Muslim power. Thus Bogra and Noakhali districts had proportionately more Muslims than Malda, Dacca and Murshidabad districts where the capitals of Muslim rulers were located (See Table 9).

The coercive power of the Muslim rulers over Hindus in Bengal was limited for two reasons. First, many Muslim rulers in Bengal rebelled against the central rule in Delhi. They had to seek the support of local population for their political survival. For example, Sultan Ilyas Shah (1339-1358 A.D.) had to enlist local Hindus in his army to fight against Firuz Shah Tughluq. He also appointed Shahdeo, a Hindu, a general in his army. Kans, a Hindu courtier, successfully staged a *coup de etat* against the Muslim rule in the fifteenth century Bengal. These indicate that the Hindu civil servants and military leaders continued to be powerful in Muslim Bengal. Secondly, the

Hindus exercised considerable power in local administration during the Muslim rule in Bengal. Even three hundred years after the establishment of Muslim rule, powerful Hindu landlords like Pratapaditya of Jessore, Kandarpa Narayan of Barisal, Lakshman Manikya of Noakhali, Kedar Rai of Vikrampur, Madhu Rai of Pabna, Binod Rai of Manikganj and Ram Chandra of Barisal dominated the rural areas of Bengal.

Table 9. Distribution of population by religion in Bengal by district, 1881

Area/district	Percentage of Muslims in total population	Percentage of Hindus in total population	Percentage of other religionists (including Buddhists, Christians, tribals and other)
Burdwan	18.9	80.5	0.6
Birbhum	20.5	77.7	1.8
Bankura	4.4	87.4	8.2
Midnapur	6.5	88.8	4.7
Hoogly	19.4	80.5	0.1
Hawrah	19.5	80.1	0.4
24 Parganas	37.3	62.0	0.7
Calcutta	31.8	62.6	5.6
Nadia	55.7	42.8	1.5
Murshidabad	48.1	51.7	0.2
Jessore	60.3	39.6	0.1
Khulna	51.4	48.4	0.2
Rajshahi	78.4	21.5	0.1
Dinajpur	52.5	47.3	0.2
Jalpaiguri	35.8	63.2	1.0
Darjeeling	5.3	81.7	13.2
Rangpur	60.9	38.9	0.2
Bogra	80.8	19.1	0
Pabna	72.4	27.5	0.4
Malda	46.3	53.3	0.4
Cooch Bihar	28.9	70.9	0.2
State			
Dacca	59.1	40.4	0.5
Mymensingh	66.8	32.3	0.9
Faridpur	59.7	40.1	0.2

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area/district	Percentage of Muslims in total population	Percentage of Hindus in total population	Percentage of other religionists (including Buddhists, Christians, tribals and other)
Bakerganj	66.6	32.8	0.6
Tippera	66.3	33.6	0.1
Noakhali	74.1	25.7	0.2
Chittagong	70.8	24.3	4.9
Chittagong Hill Tracts	7.1	19.9	73.2
Tripura State	28.1	10.2	61.7
Bengal	49.6	48.8	1.6

Source : Census of India, 1931, Vol. V, Part-I, p.411.

Politically, Hindu-Muslim rapprochement was highly desirable for the Muslim rulers in Bengal. The Muslim rulers therefore, consciously courted the Hindus. While the caste Hindus discouraged the translation of their scriptures into Bengali, it is the Muslim rulers who patronized the translation of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata*. The *Ramayana* was translated by Kirtibasa in the fifteenth century under the patronage of either Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (1415-1434 A.D.) or Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (1459-1474 A.D.). Translations of the *Mahabharata* were commissioned separately by Sultan Nusrat Shah (1520-1538 A.D.) and a Muslim feudal lord. Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (1474-1481 A.D.) engaged Maladhar Basu to render *Bhagavata* into Bengali. The same author also wrote *Srikrishna Vijaya*. Sultan Jalaluddin, who is alleged to have persecuted the Hindus, was the patron of Hindu religious scholar Brihaspati.

Though the Portuguese merchant Barbosa suspected that the Hindus became Muslims in the sixteenth century to get royal favour, instances of such royal gifts to local Muslim converts are extremely rare. On the contrary, historical records suggest that the Mughal rulers in Bengal were altogether indifferent to Islamic missionary efforts. Mirza Nathan reported that on one occasion Mughal governor Islam Khan (17th century) punished his officers for converting Hindus to Islam. Manrique, the Augustinian missionary who visited Dhaka in 1640, mentioned that the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan refused to prosecute the Christian missionaries despite the complaints

of the mullahs that the Christian were defying Islamic law by eating pork and drinking wine. In fact the Hindus benefited much more than the converted Muslims from the Muslim rule in Bengal. In Muslim Bengal, the political and military offices were monopolised by the immigrants from West Asia whereas the revenue offices were held by the Hindus. Specially, the Kayasthas—a Hindu subcaste, rose to a position of great importance in the society during the Muslim rule. The Kayasthas were preferred for revenue work because they were experienced and submissive. The Muslim rulers did not want to cause any dislocation in their revenue administration simply for patronising local converts. Consequently, Hindu revenue functionaries exploited locally converted Muslim peasants during the Muslim rule. This clearly suggests that there was no systematic policy of encouraging conversion to Islam. In the caste-dominated society of Bengal local Muslim converts continued in their old professions even after their conversions. The descriptions of the sixteenth century poet Mukundaram suggest that the Muslims in Bengal were engaged in such humdrum and lowly occupations as milkman (Goala), weaver (Jolha), cowherd (Mukeri), baker (Pitari), fish seller (Kabari), beggar (Kal), loom-maker (Rang-rez), tailors (darzi), butcher (Kasai), hazzam (those who perform circumcision) and qalandar (wandering darvishes). (Karim 1985, pp. 204-205). Conversion to Islam did not, therefore, entail any significant economic benefit in medieval Bengal.

The second hypothesis postulates that the spread of Islam in Bengal was a natural reaction of the low caste Hindus against the oppressions of Brahmins. It is presumed that the exclusive caste system of the Hindus had reduced the "semi-amphibious aborigines of Bengal into "merely the hewers of wood and drawers of water for a set of masters in whose eyes they were unclean beasts and altogether abominable" (Beverley 1872). It is, therefore, suggested that low caste Hindus naturally accepted Islam which "brought the Gospel of the Unity of God and the equality of men in its sight to a despised and wretched population" (Arnold 1913).

This hypothesis is criticized from two opposing points of view. First, it is argued that the perception of exploitation by the high caste Hindus did not at all exist in the medieval times. The dominance of high caste Hindus over low castes was viewed in pre-modern times not as exploitation but as a part of the natural order. The notion of bitter resentment against dominance of high caste Hindus is a product

of the Enlightenment in Europe. This hypothesis, therefore amounts to what Eaton describes as "reading history backward" (1994, p. 117). Secondly, it has been observed that even if the perception of upper caste exploitation existed in other parts of South Asia, it did not exist in Bengal. The hold of the Brahmins over society in Bengal was too tenuous to be exploitative. Many Brahmins in Bengal were themselves considered impure and polluted. According to legends, Adisura had to import five Brahmins from Kanauj to maintain the purity of the Brahmins (Majumder 1377 B.S., pp. 194-195). The genealogical literature also reports that present Brahmins were imported from outside Bengal by Sena King Vallala Sena and Varman King Shyamal Varma. According to Holayudh (12th century), the Brahmins in Bengal were not well-trained in vedic rituals. Local Brahmins in Bengal were mainly divided into two categories: *Srotriya Brahmana* and *Varna Brahmana*. The *Srotriya* Brahmins used to consider *Varna* Brahmins as untouchables and did not take water from their hands. There are different gradations among *varna* Brahmins themselves. The *Vyasokta* Brahmins who serve the Chashi Kaivarta caste rank so low that even their own clients do not touch food in their house. The *Agradani* Brahmins who preside at funeral ceremonies and take the offerings of the dead are considered polluted. The *graha*—*vipras* or *Acharyas* who acted as fortune—tellers, palmists and makers of horoscope were looked down upon as impure. The *bhat* Brahmins who used to earn their living by eulogising the rich were the offspring of mixed marriages and were treated as disgraced (*patita*). According to Riskey, the *varna* Brahmins in Bengal were not Aryans and many of these Brahmins were "manufactured on the spot by the simple process of conferring the title of Brahman on the tribal priests of the local deities" (Riskey 1915, p. 33). Many Brahmins in Bengal were themselves oppressed like the low castes. It is, therefore, difficult to accept the theory that the oppressions of Brahmins in Bengal drove the low caste Hindus to Islam.

The hypothesis of low caste conversion also exaggerates egalitarianism of Islam in medieval Bengal. Theoretically, all followers of Islam are equal in the sight of God and of His prophet. In Bengal, however, the Muslims themselves were contaminated by the Hindu caste system. There were two main social divisions among the Muslims of Bengal: "Ashraf" and "Ajlaf" which in Bengali has been corrupted to "Atrap". It is interesting to note that the converts from

higher caste Hindus in Bengal were equated with undoubted descendants of foreigners and treated as "Ashraf" or noble. "All other Muhammadans including the functional groups... and all converts of lower rank are collectively known by the contemptuous term, "Ajlaf" "wretches" or "mean people", they are also called as "Kamina" or "Itar" "base" or Razel, a corruption of Rizal, worthless" (Gait 1901, p. 439). Lower caste Hindus who embraced Islam did not, therefore, automatically join an egalitarian brotherhood. Neither their economic conditions nor their social status changed significantly because of conversion. In fact the converts from the lowest castes were often discriminated against in Muslim Bengal. As Gait points out, "In some places a third class called Arzal or "lowest of all" is added. It consists of the very lowest classes such as the Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Abdal and Bediya with whom no other Mohammadan would associate and who were forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground" (Gait 1901). Because of these discriminations, the lowest caste Hindus were likely to be put off by the actual practices of the Muslims.

Finally, the oppression of the Brahmins is, not in the least unique to Bengal. As the South Asian proverbs indicate, the Brahmins are equally hated throughout the subcontinent. The Brahmins are described as "a priest by appearance but a butcher at heart". The following proverb illustrates the hatred against the Brahmins: "Is Duniya men tin Kasai/Pishu, Khatmal, Brahman Bhai" (blood suckers three on earth there be/the bug, the Brahman and the flea) (Risley 1915, p.131). In fact, Bengal did not experience the worst kinds of Brahmanical oppressions. Such oppressions are more stark in other parts of South Asia. For example, in Madras a pariah is said to pollute a high-caste Hindu by approaching within a distance of sixty-four feet. In some areas of South India the Sudras are required to "leave the road when they saw a Brahman coming or to announce their approach by a special cry like the lepers of Europe in the Middle Ages" (Risley 1915). Similar inequities did not exist in Bengal. If Islam's egalitarianism vis-a-vis the Brahmanical oppression of the low caste Hindus was the main attraction for conversion to Islam, the expansion of Islam would have been more spectacular in other parts of the sub-continent.

A number of historians attribute the preponderance of Muslims in Bengal to mass conversion of the Buddhists to Islam in protest against the oppressions of the Hindu rulers. As Titus observed with

reference to eastern Bengal, "The inhabitants were under the influence of a crude form of Buddhism and despised as they were by their proud Aryan rulers who held them in disdain, they apparently welcomed the Muslim missionaries gladly" (1959, p. 45). According to another historian, "bad blood between Hindus and Buddhists might conceivably have favoured conversion to Islam" (Mitra 1954, p. 82).

There is, however, no direct historical evidence of conversion of Buddhists to Islam. There is indirect evidence of the oppression of Buddhists by the Hindus. Taranath reports that persecuted Buddhist monks acted as the spies of the Muslim invaders of Bengal (Roy 1400 B.S., p. 414). The Sena Kings were hostile to Buddhism. In *Dana Sagara* which is attributed to Vallala Sena (1160-1178 A.D.) the king was portrayed as the destroyer of the *nastiks* (atheists, implying Buddhists) in the kali age (Roy 1983, p. 34). Ramai Pundit describes how the Buddhists sought the help of God Dharma to protect them against the oppressions of the Brahmins.

It is not unlikely that some Buddhists in Bengal accepted Islam. However, these sporadic conversions cannot at all account for the preponderance of Muslims in Bengal for three reasons. First, the Buddhists themselves did not constitute the majority of the population in Bengal on the eve of the Muslim conquest. According to Nihar Ranjan Roy, the Hindus by far outnumbered the Buddhists even during the Pala rule (756-1143 A.D.) when the Buddhist kings ruled Bengal (Roy 1400 B.S., p. 508). According to another historian, on the eve of the Muslim conquest, the three main religious groups in the land in order of numerical strength were the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains (Ali 1985, Vol. I, p: 732). The conversion of Buddhists alone cannot, therefore, explain Muslim preponderance in Bengal.

Secondly, if the hypothesis that the Buddhists accepted Islam *en masse* owing to oppressions of the Hindus is correct, the conversion of the Buddhists would have taken place immediately after the establishment of Muslim rule in the thirteenth century. The accounts of Ibn Batuta clearly show that no such mass conversions to Islam took place in eastern Bengal even in the middle of the fourteenth century. While returning from Sylhet after meeting with the saint Shah Jalal, Ibn Batuta travelled down the Meghna river for fifteen days and described the people of Eastern Bengal as "infidels under Muslim rule" (1969, p. 267). This clearly indicates that mass conversion of Buddhists cannot explain for Muslim preponderance in the eastern Bengal.

Finally, the conflicts between the Hindus and Buddhists have been exaggerated. On the contrary, there are many instances of harmony and understanding between the Hindus and Buddhists. The Pala kings who were themselves Buddhists married Brahmin princesses and patronized Hindu temples. The Hindu Gods were worshipped in the Buddhist vihars. On the other hand, the Buddha himself was apotheosized by Hinduism and Hindu icons were influenced by the images of the Buddha. At the folk level Hinduism and Buddhism came very close to each other (Roy 1400 B.S., pp. 557-560). It is, therefore, very unlikely that the Buddhists will embrace Islam which did not at all recognize the Buddha as a prophet to escape from Hinduism which worshipped the Buddha as a God. The Muslims in South Asia were much less tolerant of Buddhism. As Will Durant observes, "When the Arabs came, pledged to spread a simple and stoic monotheism, they looked with scorn upon the lazy, venal, miracle-mongering Buddhist monks; they smashed the monasteries, killed thousands of monks and made monasticism unpopular with the cautious" (1963, p.505). The accounts of the chronicler Minhaz-i-Siraj indicate that Ikhtiyar-al-din Muhammed bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, the first Muslim conqueror of Bengal put to death shaven-headed Buddhist monks in Udantapuri vihara and destroyed the monastery's library (Majumdar 1958, pp. 50-51). The theory of *en masse* conversion of the Buddhists in Bengal to Islam does not, therefore, appear to be plausible.

The fourth hypothesis suggests that intensive missionary activities undertaken by the Sufi saints, contributed to Muslim preponderance in Bengal. "God be praised", wrote Mir Saiyid Ashraf Jahangir Simnani, a celebrated saint of Jaunpur in the 14th century, "what a good land is that of Bengal, where numerous saints and ascetics came from different direction and made it their habitation and home" (Rahim 1963, p. 123). Most saints who preached Islam are honoured in shrines set up by their devotees. A shrine is either a tomb or a memorial.

Table 10 presents an analysis of the distribution of the major shrines of Muslims saints (Pirs) in Bengal. The mythical saints whose shrines could not be clearly identified (such as Panch Pir, Bara Aulia etc.) were excluded. Obviously the data on the saints in the historical records are scanty. As a result, all the data in Table 10 may not be accurate. In spite of these limitations of data, Table 10 indicates two interesting trends. Of the 59 historical saints mentioned

in Table 10, three saints are reported to have preached Islam long before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the thirteenth century. Out of 56 historical saints who came to Bengal during the Muslim rule (1206-1757 A.D.) 15 percent arrived in the thirteenth century, 36 percent in the fourteenth century, 18 percent in the fifteenth century, 23 percent in the 16th century and 3 percent in the 17th and 18th centuries. This clearly indicates that intensive missionary activities of Muslim saints in Bengal lasted for about four centuries—from the thirteenth to sixteenth century. The Muslim missionary activities started in the 13th century, peaked in the 14th century, declined in the 15th century and again surged in the 16th century. This suggests that conversion to Islam in Bengal was not sudden; the gradual process of conversion continued over a long time.

Secondly, Table 10 suggests that saints carried the message of Islam to all parts of Bengal and their shrines are scattered throughout the country. However, there are certain areas which were more favoured by the saints. The historical saints showed a marked preference for Dacca, Maldah, Hugli and Burdwan districts. This may be attributed to the fact that they wanted to remain near the seats of Muslim rule.

Table. 10. Distribution of major shrines of Muslim saints in Bengal

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Chittagong	9th Century	Mythical	Bayazid Bustami	Chittagong
	13th century	Mythical	Shaikh Farid	Chittagong
	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Bakhtiar Mysore	Sandwip
	16th century	Historical	Shaikh Jalal Halwi	Hathazari
Noakhali	13th century	Historical	Syed Miran Shah	Kanchanpur
Comilla	14th century	Historical	Hadrat Rasti Shah	Meher in Chandpur
	14/15th century	Historical	Syed Ahmed Kella Shahid	Kharampur in Brahmanbaria
	14th century	Historical	Shah Kamal	Utkhara village
	14th century	Historical	Shah Muhammad Bagdadi	Shahtali in Chandpur
Sylhet	14th century	Historical	Shah Jalal	Sylhet

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Mymensingh	11th century	Historical	Shah Mohamad Sultan Rumi	Madanpur in Netrokona
	14th century	Historical	Shah Kamal	Garo Hills
	Late 15th early 16th century	Historical	Shah Adam	Atiya
Dacca	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Shraf al Din Abu Tawwamah	Sonargaon
	Date not known	Historical	Shah Niamatullah	Purana Paltan in Dhaka
	Late 13th/early 14th century	Historical	Shaikh Anwar	Sonargaon
	14th century	Historical	Baba Adam Shahid	Vikrampur in Munshiganj
	14th century	Historical	Syed Ali Tabrizi	Dhamrai
	14th century	Historical	Shah Maick Yamani	Dacca City
	15th century	Historical	Shah Langar	Ten miles North of Dacca
	Late 15th/early 16th century	Historical	Shah Mannan	Mongrapra in Sonargaon
	Early 16th century	Historical	Haji Baba Saleh	Bandar in Narayanganj
	Late 15th/early 16th century	Historical	Khawaja Chisti Behesti	Dacca
Bakerganj	16th century	Historical	Shah Ali Bagdadi	Mirpur
	14th/15th century	Historical	Syedul Arefin	Baufal in Bakerganj
Khulna	15th century	Historical	Khan Jahan Ali	Bagerhat
Jessore	16th century	Historical	Khalas Khan	Ved Kashi
Rajshahi	15th/16th century	Historical	Makhдум Jalal uddin Rupos	Rajshahi town
	16th century	Historical	Maulana Sha Daula (Shah Muazzam Danish Mand)	Bagha
Pabna	13th century Before 16th century	Historical	Makhдум Shah	Shahjadpur
		Historical	Shah Sharif Zindani	Tarash

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Bogra	11th century A.D.	Historical	Mir Syed Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar	Mahasthanagarh
	No date	Mythical	Shah Turkan Shahid	Sherpur
	No date	Mythical	Baba Adam	Adamdighi
Rangpur	Date not known	Mythical	Shah Kalandar	Domar
	15th century	Historical	Shaikh Ismail Ghazi	Kant Duar
Dinajpur	Date not known	Mythical	Nasiruddin Shah Nek mard	Nek mardan
	14th century	Historical	Maulana Ata	Gangarampur
	Late 15th/early 16th century	Historical	Shaikh Badruddin	Hemtabad
Maldah	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Jafal al Din Tabrizi	Deotala
	Late 13th/early 14th century	Historical	Shaikh Jamal	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shaikh Akhi Seraj Al Din Uthman	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shaikh Al Haq	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shaikh Raja Biyabani	Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Hadrat Nur Qutb Alam	Pandua
	15th century	Historical	Maulana Barkhurdar	Gauda
	17th century	Historical	Shah Niamatullah	Gauda
24 Parganas	14th century	Historical	Syed Abbas Ali Makki (Pir Gora Chand)	Harna Village in Bashirhat
	14th century	Historical	Rowshan Ara	Kathulia in Bashirhat
	15th century	Historical	Ekdil Shah	Barasat
Calcutta	No date	Mythical	Mobarak Ghazi	—
	No date	Mythical	Sharif Shah	Calcutta

(Contd.)

(Continued)

Area	Approximate Time	Type	Name of the Saint	Location of the Shrine
Hugli	13th century	Historical	Shah Sufi Shahid	Satgaon
	Late 13th/early 14th century	Historical	Shah Safial Din	Chota Pandua
	14th century	Historical	Shah Anwar Quli Halwi	Phurphura
	14th century	Mythical	Bara Khan Ghazi	Tribeni in Hugli
Midnapur	13/14th century	Historical	Amir Khan Lohani	Indas Village
Burdwan	13th century	Historical	Makhдум Shah	Mangalkot
	15th/16th century	Historical	Shah Sultan Ansari	Mangalkot
	16th century	Historical	Bahram Sakka	Burdwan
	16th century	Historical	Makhдум Shah Abdullah Gujrati	Mangalkot
	17th/18th century	Historical	Khawaja Anwar Shah	Burdwan
Birbhum	13th century	Historical	Shaikh Abdullah Kirmani	Khustigiri
	16th century	Historical	Makhдум Shah Zahir al Din	Makdhum
Adjoining Bihar	13/14th century	Historical	Shaikh Al Din Maneri	Bihar
District	15th century	Historical	Shaikh Husain Dukarposh	Bihar
	Late 14th/15th century	Historical	Shah Badrul Islam	Bihar
	Late 14th/15th century	Historical	Shah Majlis	Bihar

Sources: 1. *Muhammad Abdur Rahim, Social and Cultural History of Bengal Vol. I.* (Karachi: Pakistan: Historical Society, 1963), pp. 72-150.

2. Chowdhury Shamsur Rahman, *Purba Pakistane Islamer Alo* (Dacca: Pakistan Publications, 1965), pp. 33-96.

The Muslim saints are not, however, unique to Bengal. The other regions of the subcontinent were also equally blessed by the activities of the saints. H.A. Rose lists 113 major shrines of Muslim saints who preached Islam in the Punjab and North West Frontier Province

(n.d., pp. 48-84). Prominent among the saints in those areas were Khawaja Muinuddin Chisti (13th century) in Ajmer, Bu Ali Qalandar in Panipat (14th century). Data Ganj Baksh (11th century) in Lahore, Shah Fariduddin in the Punjab, Bulbul Shah and Syed Ali Hammadani in Kashmir and Qutbuddin and Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi. In the Deccan, Islam was preached by Sayyed Muhammad Gisu Daraz and Pir Mahabir Kamdyat (14th century). In Gujrat, the missionary activities were carried on by Iman Shah of Pirana and Dawal Shah Pir in the fifteenth century. In Sind and the Cutch, Sayyid Yusufuddin and Pir Sadaruddin (15th century) became famous for their missionary activities.

Historical records clearly suggest that conversions to Islam in South Asia occurred primarily through the efforts of Muslim saints. However, the degree of success of these saints varied from region to region. A question, therefore, arises why the Muslim saints attained significant success in Bengal though proselytization efforts of their counterparts failed in much of South Asia. In spiritual accomplishment, the Pirs in other parts of South Asia were not in any way inferior to the Pirs in Bengal. The inescapable conclusion is that the Pirs in Bengal succeeded not because they were more powerful, persistent or efficient but because they worked in an environment which was much more conducive to proselytization.

Of late, historians have realised that it is not sufficient to establish that Islam was propagated in Bengal by the Muslim saints (Pirs). It is also necessary to explain why Pirs in Bengal succeeded in attracting so many converts whereas the messages of their counterparts in much of South Asia fell on deaf ears. Consequently, attempts have been made to explain the uniqueness of pirs in Bengal. According to one hypothesis, Pirism or the cult of pir in Bengal was a unique brand of spiritualism that specifically catered to the needs of the people in the deltaic areas. The second hypothesis posits that pirs in Bengal were an unique blend of spiritualism and entrepreneurship that made them "charismatic pioneers in the agrarian frontier".

Asim Roy, the proponent of the first hypothesis, attributes the relative success of Islam in Bengal to the institution of "Pirism". The term pir literally implies "a spiritual director or guide". The institution of pir is not at all unique to Bengal. Roy, however, suggests that pirs in Bengal were different from their counterparts in the rest of South Asia. In his opinion, there are three distinct features of pirs in Bengal. First, the term pir in Bengal has a very wide connotation.

It covers not only mystic guides, saints and holy men but also apotheosized soldiers, pioneering settlers in the wastelands, metamorphosed Hindu and Buddhist divinities and anthropomorphized animistic spirits and beliefs. Pirs were venerated for their supernatural and thaumaturgic powers. Secondly, the institution of pir in Bengal was subjected to a process of folk religious transmutation. This gave pirism in Bengal its distinctiveness and context. The deified animistic spirits like the tiger god, the serpent goddess and crocodile goddess were integrated into the institution of pir in Bengal. Finally, the pirs became the binding forces in the highly unstable society in Bengal. As Roy puts it, "The ferocity of nature and anarchical conditions in the active delta, aggravated by the conditions of institutional inadequacies in social and cultural terms focussed on the dire need of some binding forces of authority, stability and assurance in largely unstable physical and social situation" (1983, p. 50). The underprivileged in Bengal needed the spiritual support of the Pirs to face the trials and tribulations of their everyday life. He suggests that these mass conversions of socially underprivileged groups in Lower Bengal to Islam took place because Pirism catered to their spiritual needs. He argues that "isolated and individual conversions cannot, however, offer adequate explanation for the great preponderance of Muslims in Bengal, particularly in the rural areas" (1983, p. 42). He also maintains that the initial conversion of the Bengali masses did not result in spiritual illumination and change of inner religious consciousness and experience. They were "converted in the social sense of moving out of one community to another "or a" shifting of camps" (1983, p. 38).

There are two major weaknesses in Roy's analysis. First, Roy exaggerated the distinctiveness of Pirism in Bengal. The essentials of Pirism are not unknown either to Hinduism in Bengal or to Muslims in other regions of the subcontinent. The ancient *Guru-chela* (master-disciple) relationship and the universal belief in local gods and goddesses are essential ingredients of Hinduism (Titus 1959, p. 137). The practices of Pirism among the Muslims were strikingly similar in different parts of South Asia. Some of the mythical Pirs of Bengal were venerated in the same manner in other regions of the subcontinent. The Panch Pir cult was popular among both the Hindus and Muslims throughout northern India (Rose, n.d.). Similarly Khawaja Khijr who was worshipped in Bengal as Pir Badr was venerated throughout the Muslim world. Ghazi Miyan who is adored

in Bengal as a saint of marriage and fertility is also venerated in the U.P. and the Punjab (Titus, 1959). Some of the mythical Pirs of Bengal are local such as Manai Pir, the patron saint of love, Tinnath, the protector of the cattle, Manik Pir, the guardian saint of village, Ghazi Shaheb, the Protector against tiger and Satya Pir, the protector of life and property. Similar local pirs flourished among the Muslims in other regions of India also. Shakhi Sarwar Sultan is the Punjabi equivalent of Manik Pir in Bengal. Shaikh Saddu was the counterpart of Manai Pir. Among local pirs in other parts of the subcontinent, Gugga Pir Lalbag, Pir Sahtab, Pir Milas, Pir Didar, Kath Bawa Shahib, Pir Imam Zamin etc. deserve special mention. It is not correct to assume that the peasants of Bengal needed Pirs more desperately than other South Asian farmers because the Nature in Bengal was cruel. The Nature was not, however, kinder in other parts of India. The odds of peasant life were similar throughout the whole of the subcontinent. The popularity of the Pirs as protector against the elements of the Nature was not therefore, unique to Bengal.

Secondly, there is no historical evidence on mass conversions to Islam in Bengal. There are, however, instances of mass conversions to Islam in other regions of South Asia. In the Punjab there were often conversions of entire tribes. For example, according to legends and hagiography, Baba Fariduddin of Pak Pattan converted sixteen Punjabi tribes (Titus, 1959, p. 45). There are also instances of conversions of professional groups in the cities (Karim, 1985). Mass conversions often took place when a king or tribal leader accepted Islam. There is no such instance of mass conversions in Bengal. Roy mentioned a number of instances of individual conversion. He however, could not cite a single case of mass conversion in Bengal. As Mohar Ali rightly emphasizes, "It is noteworthy that there is no mention in the sources, literary or otherwise of any large scale conversion at any time or place. Had there been any case of mass conversion of any class of people, high or low, it would have definitely found special mention in the contemporary chronicles or hagiological literature, particularly as the writers of the time were careful to note any point of religious merit for their heroes" (Ali 1985, Vol. 1B, p. 782).

Mass conversions take place when an entire group or the majority members of a group embrace a new faith. Such social aggregations may include a tribe, village community, caste group, or professional group etc. Roy could not specify which type of groups accepted

Islam in Bengal. On the other hand some of the instances of individual conversions clearly illustrate that mass conversions did not at all take place in Bengal. When Jadu became a Muslim, his father or brother did not embrace Islam. It is recorded that a Mech Chief accepted Islam in the hands of Bakhtiyar Khalji. But his followers did not accept Islam (Ali 1985, Vol. IB, p. 782). There is no instance in Bengal of conversion to Islam of an entire village or tribe. Even in eastern Bengal where the Muslims constituted a significant majority, it will be very difficult to find a village which is entirely Muslim. If mass conversion was dominant method of conversion, Hinduism would have been largely wiped out from the predominantly Muslim areas. As table-9 indicates the share of Hindu population was not insignificant even in predominantly Muslim districts.

If Roy's hypothesis of mass conversion is correct, Islam would have spread in Bengal in a short time. There are at least three reasons to infer that conversion to Islam in Bengal was gradual and spanned over at least four hundred years. First, the accounts of foreign travellers in Bengal suggest that conversion to Islam in Bengal was gradual. Ibn Batuta visited Bengal in 1342. He noted that the people in eastern Bengal were infidels. This implies that eastern Bengal was predominantly Hindu even after 150 years of Muslim rule. The Portuguese traveller Barbosa visited Bengal in 1514 A.D. He noted as follows: "The king who is a Moor is a great lord and very rich, he possesses much country inhabited by the Gentiles (Hindus) of whom everyday many turn Moors (Muslims) to obtain the favour of the King and governors" (Quoted in Rahim 1963, p. 67). This observation clearly suggests that conversion to Islam was continuing in the early sixteenth century and the country was predominantly inhabited by the Hindus till the sixteenth century. The inescapable conclusion from these accounts is that conversion to Islam continued at least till the sixteenth century. Secondly, Table 10 clearly indicates that a large number of saints preached Islam in Bengal in the sixteenth century. Had conversion to Islam in the predominantly Muslim districts in eastern Bengal been completed before the sixteenth century, these religious preachers would not have come to areas like Chittagong, Dacca, Mymensingh and Rajshahi.

Finally, the hypothesis of gradual diffusion of Islam in Bengal is supported by the recent historical research on the spread of Islam in the Middle East. According to one estimate, less than 10 percent of the population of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Spain embraced

Islam within the first century of Muslim rule. It took about four hundred years to convert the majority of local population to Islam in the Middle East countries outside Arabia (Hourani 1992, pp. 46-47).

A second attempt to explain the unique role of the pirs in Bengal was made by Eaton (1994). While Roy underlines the spiritual role of the pirs in an unstable society, Eaton emphasizes the entrepreneurship of the pirs whom he describes as the "charismatic pioneers of the agrarian frontier in Bengal". The main arguments of Eaton may be summarized as follows:

1. The spread of Islam in eastern and southern Bengal coincided with a major ecological change in the late sixteenth century. The main course of the Ganges river shifted from the western Bhagirathi to eastern Padma channel. As a result, the areas located in the western part of Bengal delta experienced gradual decrease in the flow of water and silt. In geographical parlance, these areas degenerated into a moribund delta. This resulted not only in the fall of agricultural productivity but also in recurrence of epidemics which flourished in the stagnant waters of dead rivers. By contrast, the areas in the active delta in eastern Bengal were highly fertile as well as healthy places for habitation.
2. The ecological change contributed to the migration of population from the moribund to the active delta. The newly accreted lands in eastern and southern Bengal were colonized by migrants coming "from the relatively less fertile upper delta or West Bengal or even from north India and beyond" (p. 226).
3. The colonization of the active delta in eastern and southern Bengal required the clearing of thick jungles. In Eaton's words, "superior organizational skills and abundant manpower was necessary for transforming the region's formerly thick jungles into rice fields" (p. 210). The leadership for colonization of the active delta in eastern and southern Bengal came from the pirs.
4. The pirs succeeded in setting up settlements in the active delta that attracted the indigenous communities of fisherman and shifting cultivators in addition to immigrants from outside. They constructed mosques in these new settlements and the mosques "institutionalized the cult of Islam". Because of high productivity of active delta, population in the new settlements

multiplied rapidly. The settlements established by the pirs in the active delta, therefore, contributed to the predominance of the Muslims in eastern and southern Bengal.

The main attraction of Eaton's hypothesis is that it offers a plausible explanation for the unique success of the pirs in Bengal. While the pirs in other parts of India were merely spiritual mentors, the pirs in Bengal combined spiritualism with entrepreneurship. This hypothesis is not, however, corroborated by historical evidence. First, Eaton exaggerated the disruptive effects of the shift in the course of the main channel of the Ganges. Such shifts of river channels in the deltas are not at all unusual. The moribund delta in Bengal was a wetland. The ecology of wetlands through the process of natural succession changes very slowly. Consequently, the harmful effects of the change in the main course of the Ganges became critical not in the sixteenth century but in the nineteenth century (Geddes 1929; Ganguly 1938). There is no causal relationship between the expansion of cultivation in the active delta and the spread of Islam in Bengal in the 16th and 17th centuries. The acceleration in the spread of Islam since the sixteenth century may be simply explained as the culmination of proselytization efforts of previous three hundred years.

Secondly, there is no direct evidence to support Eaton's hypothesis that there was a significant emigration from the moribund delta in west Bengal to active delta in south and east Bengal. He ignores financial and psychological costs of such migration. Because of strong emotional attachment to the ancestral land, Hindu villagers in Bengal had always been very reluctant to migrate. The respect for ancestral land is sanctified by various rites in Hinduism. The colonizers of newly formed lands in the active delta came primarily from within the region and not from outside. It is likely that a large number of people in the active delta were victims of erosion of rivers every year. Such victims are likely to be attracted to newly formed land. The spurt in population growth in the active delta might also have encouraged settlement in newly accreted lands. Had there been significant migration from west Bengal to active delta, the dialects of southern Bengal should have been influenced more by the dialects of west Bengal rather than those of eastern Bengal. The similarity of dialects in the contiguous areas in eastern and southern Bengal do not support the hypothesis of large-scale immigration from outside.

Thirdly, Eaton understates the success of Islamic missionary efforts in the moribund delta. The geographical distribution of Muslim population in the census of 1881 does not indicate very significant difference in the share of Muslims in total population between the active and moribund deltas in Bengal. Jessore, Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda districts are located in the moribund delta. The percentage of Muslim population in these districts in the census of 1881 was as follows: in Jessore 60.36 percent, in Nadia 55.5 percent, in Murshidabad 50.7 percent and in Malda 46.3 percent (see Table 9). In Khulna, which was located in the active delta, the share of Muslim population was only 51.4 percent. On the contrary, in Bogra which was located outside the active delta, the percentage of Muslim population was over 80 percent. It is, therefore, obvious that Muslim preponderance was not confined to newly colonized areas in the active delta.

Finally, he exaggerates the role of the pirs in clearing the jungles in the active delta. The colonization of newly accreted land was a continuous process. It started long before the shifting of the channel of the Ganges as well as the arrival of the Muslim saints and continued till the 20th century. Faridpur inscription of the 6th century refers to *Navyavakasika* which literally implies newly formed lands. The process continued before the arrival of the Muslims. A Chinese traveller to Bengal in 1349-50 noted as follows: "These people owe all their tranquillity and prosperity to themselves, for its source lies in their devotion to agriculture whereby a land originally covered with jungle has been reclaimed by their unremitting toil in tilling and planting" (Quoted in Ali, 1985, Vol. 1B, p.932). It is not clear why entrepreneurial pirs were needed since the 16th century whereas the process of colonization continued silently for hundreds of years. Eaton's assumption that pirs attracted to their settlements indigenous shifting cultivators and communities of fisherman appear to be grossly unrealistic. The active delta had a settled agriculture for a long time. The communities of fishermen in Bengal had always been part-time cultivators as well. The accounts of Ibn Batuta who travelled to eastern Bengal clearly show that the area was cultivated by settled farmers. What is more surprising is that Eaton portrays the immigrants from the Middle East as the pioneers of wet rice cultivation in Bengal. For example, he notes, "In Pail several miles from Habiganj stands the shrine of another holy man who is said to have come from the Middle East and taught the local people the techniques

of rice farming and the fundamentals of Islam" (p. 208). Similarly, he reported that Shah Saiyid Nasir Al Din who also immigrated from the Middle East instructed local population in clearing the land and planting rice. It is highly unlikely that the immigrants from the arid Middle East taught local people the art of wet rice cultivation which the indigenous farmers practiced for thousands of years.

An analysis of Eaton's hypothesis clearly indicates that he attempted to generalize the role of the pirs in Bengal on the basis of Khan Jahan Ali's unique experience in Bagerhat area in the fifteenth century. Khan Jahan Ali colonized mangrove forests which required superior organizational skill and large resources. However, similar resources were not at all needed for clearing sal forests and hill forests inside Bengal delta. Khan Jahan Ali was an exception. Except Pir Umar Shah of Noakhali in the 18th century, Eaton could not specifically cite the names of historical pirs who undertook the clearing of mangrove forests in the lower Bengal. He primarily relies on the evidence of folk literature. What Eaton shows is that some pirs were active in clearing the jungles in lower Bengal. This does not imply that the initiative for clearing of the forests came exclusively from the pirs. Both Muslim and Hindu landlords also took initiative in bringing virgin areas of lower Bengal under cultivation. In Khulna district, major colonization efforts took place in the nineteenth century under the aegis of the British rulers. In Bakerganj, extension of cultivation continued till the end of the nineteenth century under both Hindu and Muslim entrepreneurs. There was, therefore, no sudden spurt in colonization activities under the Muslim pirs. Eaton may be right in asserting that some villages in newly cleared areas in eastern Bengal were established by Muslim pirs. This, however, does not prove that the majority of new villages were set up by the pirs. Furthermore, much of eastern Bengal was not an empty land. There were human habitations in this area long before the shifting of the channel of the Ganges. Though every year new settlements came into being, the share of population of new villages in total population is not likely to be high. The Muslim preponderance of eastern and southern Bengal cannot, therefore, be explained by the activities of the entrepreneurial pirs.

An analysis of the distribution of well-known shrines (see Table 10) clearly suggests that the activities of the Muslim Pirs in Bengal were not confined only to the active delta in the east. There were similar

missionary efforts by the pirs in the moribund delta in west Bengal. The degree of the success of the Pirs varied from region to region.

Finally, Eaton fails to answer two vital questions. First, what was the sequence of conversion and colonization? Were immigrants settled in newly cleared lands first and converted later? Or were they converted first and settled later? Was there any lag between conversion and colonization? Secondly, he fails to explain the motivations for conversion. Were local people attracted by economic benefits of new settlements? Or was the spiritual role of the pirs more compelling?

The motivation of religious conversion may be myriad ranging from the grossly materialistic to the most sublime. Broadly speaking, religious conversions may be divided into two categories: conversion from above and conversion from below. The former refers to group conversion, the latter to individual conversion. Conversion from above may be initiated by a king or the leadership of a tribe, caste group, professional guild or village community. In both cases conversion may contribute to spiritual illumination and the heightening of inner religious consciousness and experience. However, the immediate compulsions in group conversions are social and political; in cases of individual conversion they are spiritual. These two categories of conversion are obviously ideal. In real life, no religion is disseminated entirely either from above or from below. The spread of all great religions involved conversions of both categories. In some cases the motivations may be mixed. Nevertheless in the spread of some religions "belowness" predominated, in others "aboveness". In the absence of direct evidence on conversion, the predominance of "aboveness" or "belowness" may be determined by the rapidity of the diffusion of a religion. It is likely that a religion which has a larger share of conversion from above will spread faster than a religion disseminated from below.

Islam in South Asia experienced conversions from both above and below. Obviously, in the Punjab, Sind and NWFP there were strong tribal organizations among the Muslims. It is, therefore, likely that many of such tribes had group conversions to Islam. However, the existence of strong communal organisations is not necessarily conducive to spread of new religion; sometimes they present insurmountable barriers to conversions to a new faith. As early as 1832, Jafar Sharif, the author of *Islam in India*, offered the following explanation for the failure of Islamic missionary efforts in Delhi and Agra: "Mussalmans are not found in excessive numbers in the vicinity

of the great imperial cities like Delhi and Agra, because in these parts of the country the invaders encountered powerful Hindu tribes, like the Jats and Rajputs, intensely conservative and controlled by a strong Brahman hierarchy, which resisted proselytism" (1975, p. 3). According to distinguished historian Basham, the strong sense of community in the village was "one of the chief factors in the survival of Hindu culture" (1959, p. 191). He further maintains that "organization of the castes, independent of the government and with social ostracisms as its most severe sanction, was a powerful factor in the survival of Hinduism" (1959, p. 151). The establishment of the Muslim rule in the Gangetic valley and beyond did not, therefore, pose any serious threat to survival of Hinduism. The real barrier to spread of Islam in the Gangetic valley was not any temporal or spiritual authority at the top but innumerable village communities at the grass-roots. The village communities, which performed at the same time administrative, economic and social functions, were the real bulwarks of *Sanatan dharma*. The leadership of the village communities lay in the hands of the caste Hindus. Any alien religion that denied the caste system was a direct challenge to the social structure that nurtured Brahmanism and the vested interests of the village leadership. The village leaders, therefore, zealously guarded against any intrusion of the alien religion.

Though many Hindus in South Asian villages were individually attracted to Islam by the charisma and spiritual powers of the Muslim saints, they could not accept Islam in defiance of the wishes of village leadership. Any challenge to traditional leadership in the village would entail ostracism. The life of an ostracised person was very difficult in areas where village communities were strong. No ostracised person would be accepted in another village community. Even migration to the towns was not easy because even in towns caste-groups were predominant. In such an environment, individual conversion was not likely; mass conversion of the entire village was the easiest means of proselytization. In some areas of the Punjab a few mass conversions took place. Such mass conversions were however, limited because the village leaders who owed their economic and social existence to the traditional religion was opposed to any innovation or new religion. Consequently, many Hindus in the rural areas silently adored the Muslim saints; some of them even became disciples of the Pirs, but they did not embrace Islam (Titus 1959, pp. 160-61).

Compared to other regions of South Asia, the political, social and religious institutions at the grass-roots in Bengal were weak and loose. As already discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the village organizations in Bengal were significantly different from their north Indian counterparts.

The physical and social environment of Bengal undermined the solidarity of her village organizations. Most rural settlements in the riverine Bengal, where the supply of flood-free land was limited, were small and not entirely self-sufficient. The village organizations in Bengal were, therefore, weak. They did not function as administrative and economic units. They were merely social organizations with very limited coercive power. The ostracism in Bengal villages was much less painful than in other areas of South Asia. The ostracized households in Bengal could easily set up new homesteads outside the village where they had their own independent supply of water from tanks dug for raising the land for homestead. The authority of the village organizations was further eroded by the social environment of Bengal which received continuous immigration from the rest of South Asia.

As noted in Chapter 2, the pattern of rural settlements was not, however, uniform throughout the whole of Bengal. The corporateness of village organizations in Bengal gradually waned from the western to eastern districts. This fact was first noticed by the British administrators during the census of 1872 when they were looking for grass-roots organizations to conduct the census.

There were two consequences of the weakness of village organisations in Bengal. First, the power of the caste Hindus varied in proportion to the strength of the village government. Thus the Brahmins would prefer to stay in areas with strong village administration. The hold of Brahminism was, therefore, stronger in western Bengal. As Nihar Ranjan Roy points out, "The strongest hold of this orthodoxy (brahmanical) was Bengal, west of the Ganges at least up to the southern bank of the Ajay with its citadel presumably at Navadwipa. The more east and north the country lay from the centre of Brahmanical orthodoxy lesser was and even to-day, is, its grip on the social organization" (1945, p. 44). Secondly, the weakness of village organizations promoted unbridled individualism in much of Bengal. There was no effective restriction on individual's choice of beliefs and practices. This promoted a congenial environment for heresy, heterodoxy and esoteric practices. Islam was not the first

challenge to Hindu orthodoxy in Bengal. Bengal had long been the nursery of esoteric cults like *Shajayana*, *Vajrayana*, *Kalachakrayana* and *Nathism*.

The social environment of Bangladesh region was an advantage in the spread of Islam because there was no barrier to individual conversion in Bengal. In other regions of South Asia the converts would be expelled from the village community and costs of such ostracism were very high. The Bangladesh region where rural organizations were weak, the costs of such ostracisms were less. The people in Bangladesh region could therefore, risk the hazards of conversion to a new religion. Viewed in this perspective, individual conversion to Islam was more frequent in areas where the Brahmins oppressed less than in areas where the hold of Brahminism was strong. In other words, the people in Bengal could not have accepted Islam in such large numbers if the Brahmins had unchallenged authority in the social life.

It is interesting to note that in the same social environment where Islamic proselytization succeeded, Christian evangelical efforts failed. Apparently, there were similarities between missionary efforts of the Muslims and Christians in Bengal. Like the Muslims, the Christians also captured state machinery in Bengal and launched intensive missionary activities. However, they are not really comparable for three reasons. First, Christianity came to Bengal as a religion from the modern West whereas Islam came from medieval Asia, which was more comprehensible to the people of Bengal. Secondly intensive Christian evangelization in Bengal lasted less than 150 years whereas Islamic proselytization lasted over four hundred years. Finally, Christianity in the British India had to compete with Hindu and Muslim revivalisms which were largely triggered by the political domination of the West.

There are also some apparent similarities in the spread of Islam in Bengal and in Indonesia. Some of the islands of Indonesia and Bengal were densely populated. In both areas proselytization started long after Islam's advent. The conversion to Islam in Bengal started on a significant scale in the thirteenth century; in Indonesia it began in the fifteenth century. In both regions, Islamic proselytization lasted for a long time. In Bengal it continued for over four hundred years. In Indonesia also the process of conversion to Islam went on for a long time and continued even after the establishment of the Dutch rule in the region. There is, however, one significant difference

between Indonesia and Bengal. In Bengal, Islam was propagated primarily through individual conversions. In Indonesia and Malaysia group conversions were predominant. The conversion to Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia started with the conversion of the king of Malacca in the 15th century. This was followed by the conversions of the kings of Makasar, Baten and Mataram. Islam in Indonesia was accepted by fledgling princes seeking legitimacy (Ziauddin 1970, pp. 57-84). The preponderance of conversion from above in Indonesia may be attributed to two factors. First, despite Indonesia's similarity to Bengal in hydrological conditions, group solidarity in Indonesia was stronger than in Bengal. This may be attributed to urgency of protection against continuous attacks of the pirates and wild animals in Indonesia. Furthermore, conversion to an alien faith in Indonesia is not at all novel. Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia also started as court religions which percolated later to common people.

In short, the spread of Islam in Bengal offers a unique example of conversion from below. A protracted proselytization was carried on over four hundred years by innumerable Muslim preachers who took the message of Islam to every nook and corner of Bengal. While similar Islamic missionary activities failed in other regions of South Asia, Islam ultimately succeeded in penetrating deeply into Bangladesh region because the social environment of this area was congenial to the diffusion of a new religion. In much of South Asia, strong village communities were impenetrable barriers to the spread of Islam. In Bangladesh region, institutions in rural areas were weak and ineffective. As a result, heterodoxy in this region always prospered. Individual conversions induced by inner religious urges silently swelled the Muslim population in Bengal.

Chapter 5

DYNAMICS OF DICHOTOMY AND CONFRONTATION

The Muslim rule in Bengal (1203-1757) witnessed the crystallization of the forces of both unity and division in the society. The political unification of the areas within natural limits of Bengal zone was a gift of the Muslim rulers. The vernacular Bengali language also flowered under the umbrella of Muslim rule. Unlike their indigenous predecessors, the Muslim rulers in Bengal actively patronized Bengali language and literature. The intellectual ferment in the wake of spread of Islam contributed to development of the vernacular that carried stirring messages of competing faiths to unlettered masses.

Political and linguistic unity was, however, counterbalanced by the divisive forces of cultural dichotomy and new forms of economic polarization which reinforced each other. Islam was the first major alien religion in Bengal. Deeply rooted in the Semitic heritage, Islam not only created a profound chasm between local and alien beliefs and rituals but also nurtured among the believers conflicting emotions about the faith and the habitat. The Muslim rule in Bengal also added a new dimension to her economic life. "Taxation raised by a King", says the Indian poet, "is like the moisture of the earth sucked up by the sun, to be returned to the earth as fertilizing rain" (Dutt 1966, vol. I, p. xxvii). This held true about pre-Muslim Bengal, where except brief interludes, the rulers were independent and did not, therefore, pay any tribute to overlords abroad.